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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 COLOMBO 000787

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STATE FOR SA/INS

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TAGS: PHUM KIRF PREL CE

SUBJECT: SRI LANKA: A/S ROCCA RAISES ANTI-CONVERSION
LEGISLATION WITH LEADERSHIP, HUMAN RIGHTS ACTIVISTS

REF: COLOMBO 742 AND PREVIOUS

Classified By: Amb. Jeffrey J. Lunstead for reason 1.4 (B, D).

SUMMARY

11. (C) In a series of separate discussions on April 20 with political leaders, government officials and human rights activists, Assistant Secretary for South Asian Affairs Christina Rocca and the Ambassador highlighted U.S. concerns over proposed anti-conversion legislation (reftel). A/S Rocca warned that passage of the legislation could undermine Sri Lanka's long-standing reputation for religious tolerance and affect negatively our cordial bilateral relations. Government interlocutors assured A/S Rocca and the Ambassador that the Government was not pushing for passage of the bill. Other sources said they view the Government's proposed bill as a short-term political ploy to gain favor with more conservative elements and were generally skeptical that the draft bill would pass. Human rights activists cautioned that President Kumaratunga's game of "political chess" could backfire by inciting latent communal sentiments. End summary.

GOVERNMENT ANTI-CONVERSION LEGISLATION:
THE OFFICIAL WORD

12. (C) In a series of separate discussions on April 20 with political leaders, government officials and human rights activists, Assistant Secretary for South Asian Affairs Christina Rocca and the Ambassador stressed continued U.S. concern over proposed bills (one drafted by the Government and one by an opposition Buddhist monk party) aimed at curbing religious conversions. A/S Rocca and the Ambassador repeatedly emphasized the potential damage such legislation could spell for religious tolerance as well as the possible negative impact on existing cordial bilateral relations.

13. (C) Prime Minister Mahinda Rajapakse assured A/S Rocca and the Ambassador that he did not believe the Government of Sri Lanka (GSL) bill would ever come to a vote in Parliament, adding that every U.S. official he has met recently has raised the issue with him. A/S Rocca noted that the Administration as well as many in Congress were very concerned about the potential harm the legislation could inflict on Sri Lanka's history of religious freedom. The PM admitted the GSL was using its bill for political reasons--to thwart attempts by Buddhist monk MPs of the Jathika Hela Urumaya (JHU) to pass similar legislation. He underscored that the "President was against" the legislation--as if implying that such a statement should be adequate assurance that the bill would never see the light of day. The Ambassador countered that as long as the bill exists--with the implied support of the GSL and thus the ever-imminent threat of its introduction into Parliament--people in the international community and in Sri Lanka will remain concerned.

14. (C) In a separate meeting, A/S Rocca told Foreign Secretary H.M.G.S. Palihakkara that passage of the bill

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"would stop people in their tracks," with Congress especially focused on the issue. The Foreign Secretary tried to re-assure A/S Rocca and the Ambassador that many steps still had to be taken before the bill could become law, such as public notice and review and further judicial review. There was no unanimity in the government over the bill, Palihakkara asserted, adding that he shared some of the U.S. reservations about the bill. "Having said that," he declared "we do have a problem with unethical conversions" perpetrated by certain groups. He hinted, however, that the government was working on arriving at a solution. The President is very concerned about this, he allowed. He also mentioned that the GSL had invited the U.N.'s Rapporteur on religious freedom to visit the island.

OTHER PARTIES' POINTS OF VIEW

15. (C) The proposed legislation featured prominently in A/S Rocca's discussions with leaders of various political parties as well. Rauff Hakeem, head of the Sri Lanka Muslim Congress, told A/S Rocca and the Ambassador that his party would not support the bill, adding that the government has no right to legislate on matters of religious belief. He also called on the Ambassador to convince leaders of the Sri Lanka Freedom Party and the United National Party (the two largest parties) to refrain from allowing their members to vote their conscience on the matter because he believed such a laissez-faire policy would increase the likelihood that the bill will pass. In a separate discussion, Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) leader Somawansa Amarasinghe stated that his party had no official stance on the bill. He continued by adding in a somewhat convoluted manner that we condemn bribery in both politics and religion⁸ (thereby implying a certain degree of credence in "unethical conversion" charges leveled against Christian denominations), but concluded by saying that all religions should peacefully exist in a secular society under a secular government.

UNP SEES TSUNAMI CONNECTION

16. (C) Opposition Leader Ranil Wickremasinghe told A/S Rocca that his United National Party (UNP) was against proposed anti-conversion legislation. When the JHU introduced its bill last year, he said, the UNP had tried to stop it in committee. The party was blindsided by the GSL bill, he acknowledged. Wickremasinghe reported that he believes the government is not committed to the bill; pursuing it will cause the GSL to lose Christian votes. However, if the bill were to come up for a vote, the UNP would have to follow the SLFP in allowing a free vote,⁸ making it hard for members to vote against it, he speculated.

Having reviewed the draft, he said, the UNP believes the GSL bill should go to committee and form the topic of consultations with religious leaders from all groups to ensure all opinions are considered and rights are protected. Discussion of the bill in Parliament could prove so divisive and jeopardize communal harmony so much, he said, that the best strategy is to prevent the bill from ever being voted upon. Wickremasinghe assured the Ambassador that the JHU bill was not on the agenda (the "standing orders") in parliament. Rather, it was on the "order book" which, he assured us, meant nothing. (Note: Per reftel, the JHU thinks it is on the agenda. End note.)

17. (C) UNP MP Milinda Moragoda tied the latest push toward anti-conversion legislation to the influx of money for NGOs engaged in tsunami relief work. Many are suspicious that aid money is Christian money for conversion.⁸ Wickremasinghe said that there is a belief among some that the U.S. Congress is funding fundamental Christian churches. A/S Rocca asked if any of the numerous stories about forced conversions were real. Moragoda responded that about 90 percent were likely fabrications, but stressed that many of the Buddhist clergy believe the stories and vociferously spread them, such as one rumor that World Vision was putting a Bible in each tent it provided for the displaced. Ambassador and A/S Rocca strongly counseled that the ramifications of a successful anti-conversion bill would have a negative impact on all of Sri Lanka and could affect aid and other assistance to the country. Wickremasinghe indicated he understood and agreed that all international assistance could be jeopardized.

NGOS: THE THREAT IS REAL

18. (C) During an April 20 luncheon, human rights activists underscored to the Ambassador and A/S their concern at both bills. Nayomini Weerasooriya of the National Evangelical Alliance (herself a convert from Buddhism) said that the proposed legislation is part of a continued pattern of harassment and intimidation of Christians, especially in rural areas. Public support for such legislation was not widespread, participants agreed; the furor was perpetrated by just a handful of zealot monks. That said, an undercurrent of suspicion/misunderstanding/ignorance of Christian values helped fuel rumors of forced conversions, Weerasooriya asserted. She added that she believes President Kumaratunga herself is personally quite tolerant of ethnic and religious minorities, but that she is using the GSL bill in a game of "political chess" to win JHU support. The President may believe that, once having secured that support, she can somehow turn off the bill later. If so, Weerasooriya warned, the President may be miscalculating. Communal sentiments, she concluded, once riled, are difficult to defuse.

COMMENT

19. (C) With the obvious exception of the JHU, no political party has told us unequivocally it supports anti-conversion legislation. (In separate discussions, the Tamil National Alliance has told us firmly it would not support the legislation. About 30 percent of Tamils are Christian.) Even the GSL, which drafted one of the current bills, insists, somewhat schizophrenically, that it is not seeking its actual passage. That said, for an issue with so few avowed advocates, the anti-conversion specter has continued to dog Sri Lankan politics for several years. If the GSL bill is, as popular wisdom seems to hold, a gambit to win a handful of JHU votes, it is a dangerously short-sighted game to play. Sri Lanka has already suffered more than 20 years of ethnic violence. Creating legislation bound to exacerbate comparatively mild religious tensions and further split this already deeply divided society seems exceptionally foolhardy. We will continue to urge, in the strongest possible terms, that the GSL work to prevent passage of such legislation.

110. (U) A/S Rocca cleared this cable.

ENTWISTLE